

Blackstone Canal  
Providence Vicinity  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

HAER No. RI-7

HAER  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
173-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington D.C. 20240

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FOL 7/8...

HAER  
RI  
4-PROV  
173-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

RI-7

BLACKSTONE CANAL

Date: 1824-1828

Location: Providence vicinity, Providence Co. RI

Built by: Blackstone Canal Co.

Owned by: Blackstone Canal Co.

Significance: The Blackstone canal was one of the regions first long distance transportation systems. It was one of the waterways that helped to spawn the industrial development that took place in the Blackstone Valley in the mid 19th century.

Transmitted by: Daniel Clement, 1983 with historical data drawn from HAER office file.

The Blackstone Canal was designed to connect Worcester Mass. with the seaport at Providence R.I. Built primarily for the transportation of commercial goods, the canal also carried passengers the 45 miles between the two cities. The Blackstone Canal Company was incorporated through an act of the Mass. State Legislature in 1823 (a joint Rhode Island charter soon followed). The estimated cost of \$323,319 proved to be only half of the amount necessary to do the job.

Construction started in 1824 and continued for four years. The canal ascended 451 feet and passed through 49 granite locks (records show that 13 more were added later). At many places canalized rivers and ponds were used instead of a manmade canal. This proved to be a hinderance since low water in summer made many of these parts of the canal unusable. Still, the Blackstone canal proved to be a fine example of workmanship and it opened for trade on Oct. 7, 1828.

The prosperity of the canal proved to be short lived. Within just a few years after opening, business on the canal dropped sharply. In 1832 a rail line opened to Boston and provided a quicker, and often cheaper, way to get goods to the sea. In 1847 the Providence and Worcester Railroad began operation and within a year (Nov. 9, 1848) the canal ceased operation. In 1849 the joint RI-Mass charter was withdrawn.

Over the years some of the canal was filled in and what was left has become overgrown with brush and trees. However, its remains are still visible in many locations and provide enduring evidences of one of the region's first long distance transportation systems.

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

Addendum to:  
Blackstone Canal  
Providence Vicinity  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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173-

Blackstone Canal  
(Northeast Corridor Project)  
HAER No. RI-7

Addendum to  
Blackstone Canal  
Providence vicinity  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

Data pages 1 and 2 previously transmitted to Library of Congress.

Location: From Front Street Bridge, Lincoln, Rhode Island,  
to Steeple and Promenade Streets, Providence, Rhode  
Island

Date of Construction: 1824-1828

Present Owner: Varies

Present Use: Unused, except where part of the waterway or river,  
such as Moshassuck River in Providence

Significance: The canal was built to assist in commerce between  
Providence and Worcester, and to stimulate the  
industrial development of intervening towns and  
villages along the Moshassuck and Blackstone rivers.  
It remains a significant feature illustrative of early  
nineteenth century transportation engineering.

Project Information: The Blackstone Canal will be affected by the Northeast  
Corridor Improvement Project of the Federal Railroad  
Administration. Mitigative documentation prepared by  
DeLeuw, Cather/Parsons, Washington, D. C., for the  
U. S. Department of Transportation, September 1983.

(For overview history and bibliography, see PROVIDENCE COVE LANDS,  
HAER No. RI-24) HAER RI, 4-PROV, 175

#### HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Blackstone Canal was opened in 1828 between Worcester, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island. This was intended to offer cheaper, more efficient freight transport and to stimulate industrial development of intervening towns and villages along the Moshassuck and Blackstone rivers (Harrington, 1970). Twenty feet wide or more throughout, it was walled in stone where necessary, both to contain the canal stream and to support the towpath. It had forty-nine locks with towpaths, basins, dam, wharves, embankments, toll houses, etc., all indicative of the engineering and construction skills of that time.

Shipping was temporarily revived in the Salt Cove upon construction of the canal, even though these waters were closed to seagoing vessels in 1816 by the construction of the fixed-span Weybosset Bridge. The construction of the canal stimulated public improvements in the vicinity of the cove, among which was the extension of Canal Street north of Smith Street, with a retaining wall along the east shore of the cove. Cove Street was constructed on what is now Exchange Place, and a new Cove Street Bridge north of Weybosset Bridge connected to Canal Street. A causeway was built from Canal Street with a roadway and bridge across the cove to its north shore, which terminated at a point near present-day Gaspee Street (Cady 1957, 95). A boat basin with a tidal lock adjacent to Canal Street was created by the dammed waters above the causeway. Numerous industries clustered along the canal, as can be seen in Figure 6. Inexpensive housing was built along its banks to shelter laborers and factory workers, many of them free Blacks or Irish immigrants, attracted by the employment possibilities.

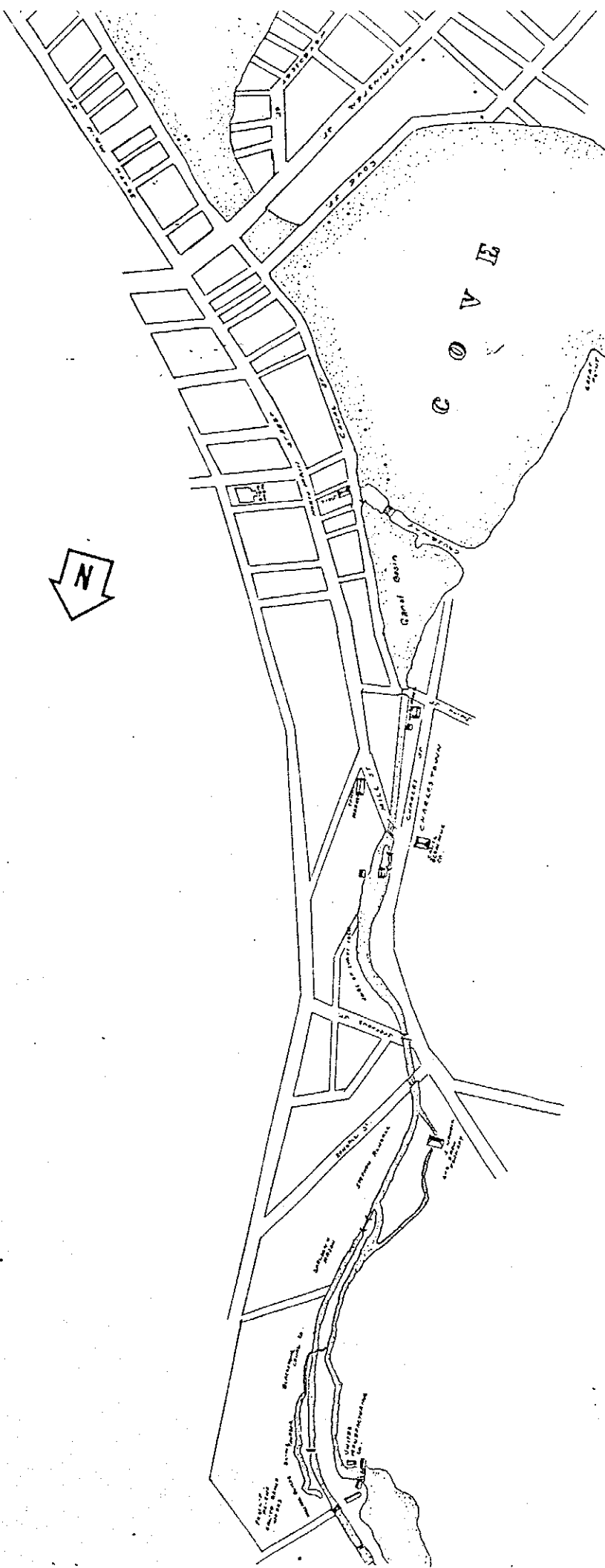
The canal's importance, however, was shortlived. By 1830, the steam engine had emerged and supplanted later as the primary motive power. The advent of steam power enabled manufacturing interests to locate farther from the rivers, and the steam engine ushered in the age of the railroad. Within the twenty years of the Blackstone Canal's use, the total dividends declared were two dollars and seventy-five cents, paid during the first eight years between 1828 and 1836 (Greene 1886, 130). Thus, while the Blackstone Canal constituted a major effort to improve the overland transportation system, it was of little assistance to industry in the transport of goods. Cost overruns and operational problems as well as the advent of the steam locomotive forced its abandonment (Fink 1981, 5). The only physical remains within the project area of the original Blackstone Canal are the Canal Street retaining walls (Photos 1 and 2). The walls on the west side of the river were built later in the nineteenth century when the Moshassuck River was channelized and meat packing companies leased space over the water.

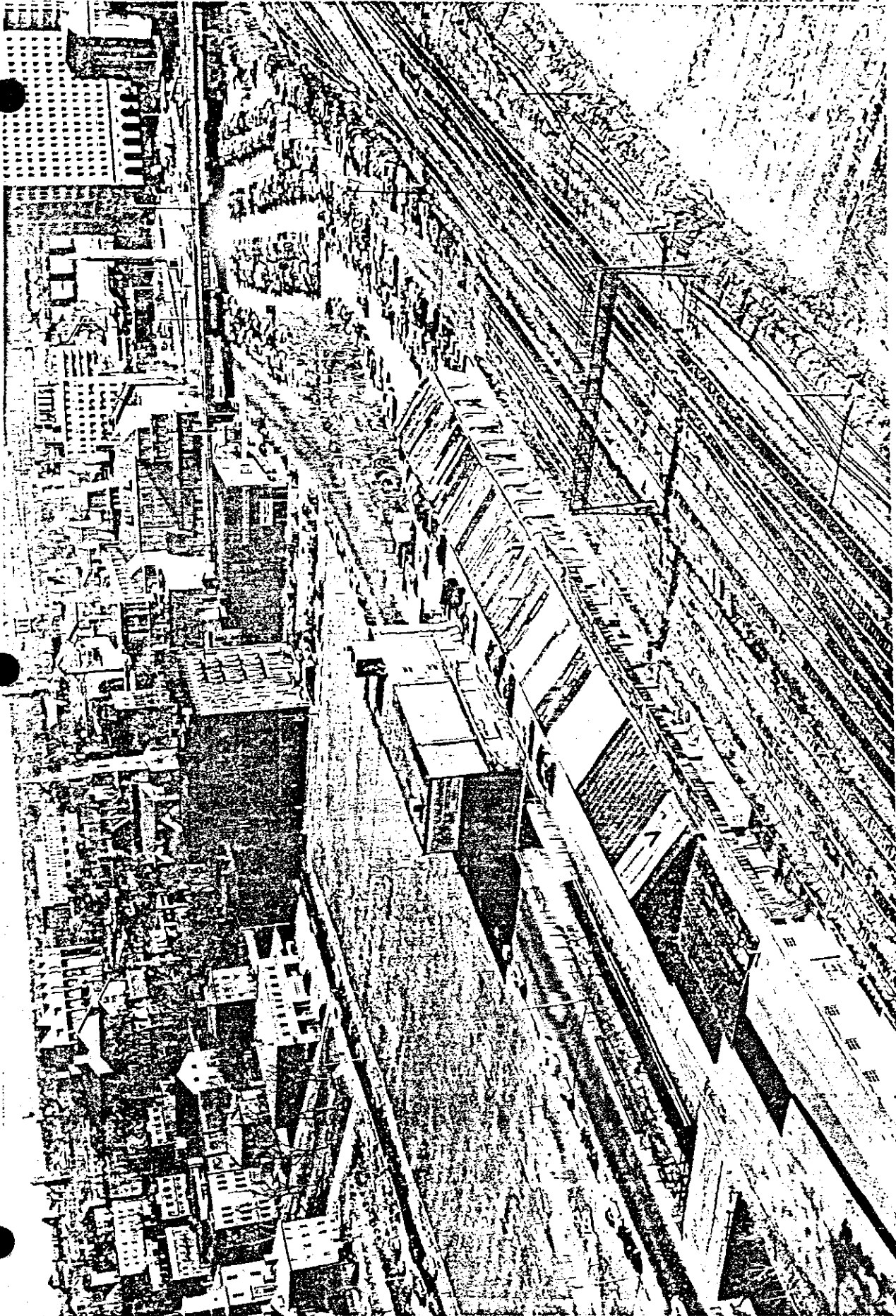


J. ARTEMEL  
 1973

# **Blackstone Canal Terminus at Canal Basin Providence, RI ca. 1833**

Blackstone Canal, ca. 1833. The Providence section of the Canal terminated at the Great Salt Cove with the Canal Basin. Industries dependent on the water power and transportation line the route.



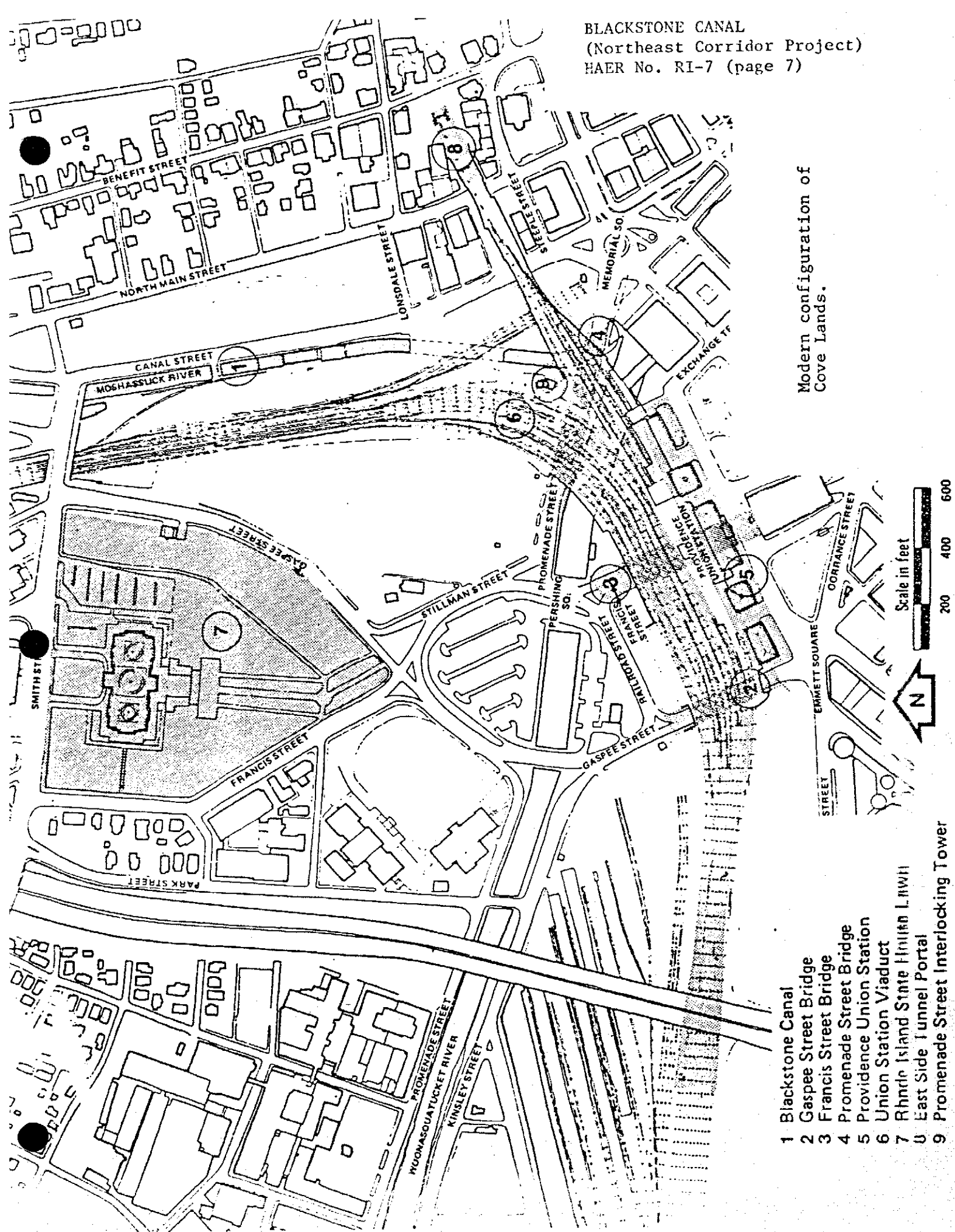


View to south showing the Moshassuck River/Blackstone Canal, Tefft Freight House,  
and East Side Tunnel Viaduct in upper right near Memorial Square.

Photographer: Jack Boucher, 1977  
HAER



Modern configuration of  
Cove Lands.



- 1 Blackstone Canal
- 2 Gaspee Street Bridge
- 3 Francis Street Bridge
- 4 Promenade Street Bridge
- 5 Providence Union Station
- 6 Union Station Viaduct
- 7 Rhode Island State House
- 8 East Side Tunnel Portal
- 9 Promenade Street Interlocking Tower